

THE TRUE HISTORY OF „DRAKULA HALÁLA” JENŐ FARKAS, FILMVILÁG, 1997/12.

On the Wikipedia page for *Drakula halála*, Garry D. Rhodes and László Tamásfi present information about Károly Lajthay's 1921 film—the first Dracula adaptation—without citing sources, as if based solely on their own research. However, back in 1997, long before either of their publications, I analyzed most of the known facts in my article “*The Hungarian Dracula*” (Filmvilág, Budapest), where I also published three excerpts from the film novel—edited by Lajthay—which I had discovered. This was the first time these texts appeared in Hungarian since 1924. In 2010, I published *Dracula and Vampires in Budapest*, the first complete edition of the film novel, featuring a foreword by Mária Szepes titled *Foreword to the New Edition*, explicitly referring to my version. I share these facts to provide clarity for researchers studying *Drakula halála*, the lost Hungarian–Austrian–French silent film destroyed during WWII. Despite Rhodes's consultations with Hungarian film experts and Tamásfi's one-hour interview with me, neither has acknowledged these prior contributions.

See also:

— Lokke Heiss¹, *Dracula Unearthed*, Cinefantastique, New York, Oct. 1998, pp. 90–92;
Vampirisme.com Interviews: *Interview avec un universitaire: Jenő Farkas*, 2023; *Carmilla, Visum et repertum* 4: Jenő Farkas, Franco Pezzini, 2025;
https://adt.arcanum.com/en/view/Filmvilag_1997/?pg=785&layout=s (Farkas Jenő: *A magyar Drakula*, Filmvilág, 1997 /12. december); Farkas Jenő: *Drakula és a vámpírok*, Budapest, Palamart Kiadó, 2010, pp. 1–326. [ISBN 978 963 86287 7 0](#)

FILMVILÁG, DECEMBER 1997/12.

HORROR

BEFORE NOSFERATU

JENŐ FARKAS: THE HUNGARIAN DRACULA

To close the anniversary year of the legendary vampire (it has been one hundred years since the publication of Bram Stoker's novel Dracula), a film historical curiosity deserves mention: one year before the success of Murnau's Nosferatu, in February 1921, Dracula's Death, a film by Károly Lajthay, premiered in Vienna.

Following the First World War, audiences showed an intensified interest in mystical and fantastical films (books on such themes were also selling in incredible numbers). On the movie screen, largely abstract stories came to life; everything that seemed unbelievable and impossible when read became more plausible and credible in film, wrote *Filmújság* in 1921. This brief characterization of the spirit of the age appears to be accurate. These few sentences undoubtedly reflect Freud's 1919 essay on the “uncanny”: in his study *Das Unheimliche*, Freud explains that the uncertainty and transitional fluctuation between imagination and reality, the perception of the “foreign” and the “unknown,” evoke in the individual not only a sense of fear, but also a longing for that fear.

The fantastic, as the Surrealists would later say in connection with *Nosferatu*, is an expression of the modern emotional world. Abstract colors are symbols of absolute renewal, something only cinema can

¹ Graven Images: The Search for Drakula (part 2) | Lokke Heiss

convey. At the time, newspapers advertised Alain Kardec's book *Spiritism*. Cinemas were playing *The Clutching Hand* — based on the Stevenson novel — to sold-out audiences. "All of Budapest is in a fever," noted *Mozi és Film*. Everyone was talking about Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, who, with his mystical dual self, marvelous beauty, and terrifying ugliness, kept the audience at the Renaissance cinema in a state of dreadful excitement. Then came the phantom, Frankenstein, the vampire, the Golem.

So it is only logical that the era's hunger for mysticism and the fantastic would be satisfied by the appearance of Dracula. He is the Other, the outsider who moves with heartbreakin ease along the border between life and death, above all laws yet ultimately conquerable; at once repulsive and alluring, man and beast, seductive and hateful. He is the one who speaks aloud our most hidden thoughts and desires, who breaks social rules and effortlessly transgresses eternal, immutable laws — thus creating, if only for a fleeting moment, a sense of total freedom in the viewer or reader. Dracula's appearance on screen is inevitable.

In 1922, F. W. Murnau's Dracula film, *Nosferatu*, was released "to tremendous success." According to *Színházi Élet*, "Dracula fever is on the rise. It is highly unusual, almost unprecedented in the history of motion picture theatres, for a first-run cinema to be forced to reprogram a film drama just weeks after its original premiere. Yet this is exactly what happened at the Helikon cinema, where, at the direct request of the audience, the management once again scheduled *Dracula*."

International film history generally claims that *Nosferatu* was the first Dracula film, but we know of a version by Károly Lajthay. According to Richard Bojarski, a respected expert on the subject, in his book *The Films of Béla Lugosi, Nosferatu* is "the first celluloid presentation of Stoker's novel, Dracula in 1922." Ten years later, Philippe Ross (*Dracula*, 1990) wrote that "contrary to popular belief," Murnau's *Nosferatu* cannot be considered the first film adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel. "In fact, in 1921, a certain Károly Lajthay created his *Dracula*, filmed in Hungary [and in Austria], a work which has since vanished. Nevertheless, we would like to know more about the count's adventures, filmed in Béla Lugosi's homeland." It is true that the first *Dracula* film print is lost, but in recent years a great deal of information has surfaced — including the novel version that served as the film's script basis, and even some visual material from the film itself.

This "certain" Károly Lajthay (1883–1946) was a Hungarian film director, born in Marosvásárhely. A fresh treat for American "Draculologists": Lajthay, too, was Transylvanian. After studying acting in Budapest, he performed with various provincial and capital city theatre companies. From 1916 on, he worked in film and even ran his own production company. In the 1920s, he worked as a film director in Vienna, and later as an actor in Berlin and Paris. He made a dozen films. According to *Mozi és Film*, his 1921 film *Levágott kéz* (*The Severed Hand*) was "the finest Hungarian film." As *Színház és Mozi* wrote, *The Severed Hand*'s artistic shots and striking scenes had a tremendous effect on audiences at every screening. According to Mária Szepes — who appeared as a child in Lajthay's film *Leánybecsület* (*Honor of a Girl*) and shared this information — he was a handsome, tall, hot-tempered, and womanizing man. At the time, he was living in Budapest with his eighteen-year-old wife.

Károly Lajthay presumably wrote the screenplay for *Drakula halála* (*Dracula's Death*) as early as 1920. The question is: based on what? Stoker's novel — or perhaps a Hungarian adaptation of *Dracula*? In 1924, Lajos Pánczél, a well-known film critic, novelist, journalist, and screenwriter, published a version of the Dracula story titled *Drakula halála (Fantasztikus filmregény)* *Dracula's Death (A Fantastic*

Film Novel) in Temesvár, which we assume he also authored. It is likely that [Lajthay](#) used an earlier version of this work during the filming of [Drakula halála](#) (*Dracula's Death*).

The foreword describes the work as a mystical tale that leads into the colorful realm of unbridled human imagination. This realm is the “tempestuous night” of dreams and visions, where the silent yet ominous comedy of dark shadows and the living dead unfolds. The pulsating and gripping storyline’s “film version is the work of Hungarian spirit.” According to the foreword, the story was adapted for the screen and directed by [Károly Lajthay](#), featuring the following cast: [Paul Askenas](#) (Askenas), [Margit Lux](#), [Dezső Kertész](#), [Elemér Thury](#), [Lene Myl](#), and others. The story takes place in an Alpine village, in a Viennese psychiatric hospital, and in the imaginary Dracula castle. This is more of an Austro-Hungarian interpretation of the [Dracula](#) novel. Fear and anxiety are realized through different means; the vampire count’s world-shattering, order-defying power is absent. Instead, the Hungarian version emphasizes the psychiatric hospital, mental illness, dreams, and nightmares. Dracula himself is a mad music teacher, confined to the “realm of the living dead.”

Later, he is called a “devilish specter,” a “son of the devil,” a “man from hell.” The sophisticated Lucy (and the clever Mina) of [Stoker](#)’s novel is replaced by sixteen-year-old Märy Land. Märy is a poor, orphaned seamstress. Every week she visits her father, who has been committed to a psychiatric hospital after being unable to bear the death of his wife. In the asylum, Märy encounters the renowned composer, her former teacher, who believes himself to be Dracula and claims he is “immortal, has lived for a thousand years and will live forever.” (Many still remember the great master teacher who “lived, lives, and will live”: About two decades ago, the witty French writer [Pierre Gripari](#) wrote in [L'Origine du Vampire](#). (*The Origin of the Vampire*) that we can only truly be at peace once the Russian Communist Party makes the brave and painful, yet absolutely necessary decision to drive a stake through the heart of the vampire in Red Square and burn him. Gripari could not have known that by then, it was no longer the party making the decisions.)

The author twists the story. Two fellow asylum inmates, posing as “doctors,” tie down the abandoned Märy by force to an operating table, intending to perform eye surgery on her. However, Dr. Tillner and the nurses intervene just in time and save Märy. The exhausted girl spends the night in the hospital and has a terrible dream: Dracula drags her by force to his castle, the “house of pleasures,” and dresses her in a bridal gown. The vampire count’s “twelve beautiful women” and his household prepare for the wedding. “A strange, nerve-wracking, intoxicating, and sensual scent spread through the castle,” which “was bathed in mystical light,” Märy recalls.

During the filming, the Budapest-based [Színház és Mozi](#) reported on the film and its set designs in an article titled [Esküvőn voltam](#) (*I Was at a Wedding*): “A huge hall, marble all around, and in the center a dark corridor that seems almost endlessly long. Here lives Dracula—or rather, here he leads his mysterious life. It is evening. The screeching and thrashing of all kinds of animals can be heard, then the door at the center opens, and extraordinarily beautiful women appear, dressed in dreamlike costumes—these were Dracula’s former wives. But now Dracula awaits his new bride, the most beautiful, the most desirable, for whom he has moved heaven and earth, and whom he welcomes with a shower of flowers...”

In the novel, Märy — Dracula’s newest bride — reaches out toward the vampire, trembling with ecstasy, holding out the cross hanging from her necklace. Dracula recoils in fear, and Märy, with a touch of theatrical flair, exits the scene—and escapes the castle as well. Half-frozen, she is found by

kind strangers who summon a doctor. Meanwhile, Dracula follows her trail and appears at Märy's sickbed.

Dracula's sparkling eyes virtually hypnotized the company," but with the doctor's help, Märy is rescued from the devil's clutches. Her soul, as if freed from a nightmare, rejoices that it had all been just a dream—writes the author. But the uncertainty remains. Märy keeps repeating, "I'm awake now... or am I still trapped in the terrifying dream?" In the end, everything turns out well: in the madhouse, a lunatic shoots Dracula; Märy marries the honorable forester, George. However, Märy never tells her husband about the "horrible dream"—the secret remains forever hidden. Not even Märy knows what truly happened to her: "Did I dream it... or did I truly live through that terrible adventure?"

According to [Philippe Ross](#), *Dracula* was filmed in Hungary. But this is not entirely accurate. The exterior scenes were shot near Vienna, around the villages of Wachau, Steinhof, and Melk, while the interior scenes were filmed at the Corvin Film Studio. ("Far better equipped than any studio in Vienna," claimed [Lajthay](#).

The film was premiered in Vienna in February 1921 as part of an ambitious cinematic project. According to a report in [Képes Mozivilág](#), the female lead was played by a new star of Serbian origin, [Lene Myl](#). Her spirited performance, commanding presence, and distinctive facial expressions ensured the film's success. Until then, the actress had worked with film studios in Berlin and Rome. Her photograph appears alongside the article.

However, in the 1923 Budapest screening advertisement and in the foreword of the film novel, [Margit Lux](#) is listed as the lead actress, although [Lene Myl](#)'s name also appears among the cast. According to the mentioned article in [Színház és Mozi](#) (1921/Issue 1), "the bride... of course, is played by an actress — [Margit Lux](#), the charming and talented film actress, who had already enjoyed great success for her remarkable ability to cry so beautifully on screen." It is likely that [Lene Myl](#) played Märy in the original version, while [Margit Lux](#) portrayed her in a later version.

Why was this *Dracula* never released in Hungarian cinemas? Possibly because of the 1921 cinema decree. Contemporary newspapers reported that film studios had halted production, cinemas were not showing "new pictures," and only re-runs were being screened. Film distributors had no intention of purchasing new titles. According to [Jenő Barna](#), a depressing silence, bleak inactivity, and — worst of all — utter uncertainty weighed heavily on the entire film industry. In 1921 and 1922, no mention of Lajthay's *Dracula's Death* appears in the trade press. Much later, in the April 1, 1923 issue of [Mozi és Film](#), the film is listed in the release calendar: [Drakula halála](#) (*Dracula's Death*) was shown on April 14, 1923 at the Tivoli cinema, followed by a re-run in the summer of 1924. The film was purchased by distributor [Jenő Tuchten](#), who promoted it as a hit in the newspapers of the time.

Translation

Károly Lajthay Drakula halála /Dracula's Death

Chapter III Human shadows

[...] The chief physician was about to conclude his explanation when Märy's gaze fell upon a tall, gaunt man with wild, matted hair and the face of Beelzebub.

— "Who is that terrifying man?! He looks at me like a murderous thief eyes his prey! He's devouring me with his eyes, which burn with the dreadful colors of hell!"

— “He was once a brilliant composer,” — replied Dr. Tillner. — “Now he believes himself a ruler. He refuses to part even at night with his royal cloak.”

— “How strange! He so closely resembles the organist who taught me to sing at the orphanage years ago,” Märy continued.

— “If you’re not afraid, try speaking to him,” said the chief physician. — “It’s no use when I ask him anything — he remains silent with me!” [...]

Chapter IV Dracula

Encouraged by the chief physician, Märy slowly approached the man wrapped in a royal cloak, who looked upon the unfamiliar girl with a terrible, twisted smile. Märy had, by now, grown more or less accustomed to these strange and extraordinary people, and she addressed the man boldly:

— “How are you, Teacher?... Don’t you remember me? My name is Märy Land...
Five years ago, at the orphanage...”

— “I remember nothing,” replied the fearsome figure. — “I remember nothing at all!
I am Dracula... the immortal!...”

A wild flame leapt up in the strange man’s heart.

And in a sharp, piercing voice he cried out again:

— “Yes! I am Dracula... the immortal!”

Land Märy shuddered at the sight of this terrifying figure. She already regretted initiating the conversation, but recalled the chief physician’s reassuring words and pressed on.

— “Try to remember, Teacher... I sat in the second row... I sang soprano, and you often patted my hair to show your approval... it was long ago... but I still remember it all.”

The madman trembled.

— “I have lived for a thousand years, and I will live forever... Immortality is mine... Immortality! I am eternal... Humans may die, the world may perish, but I live, I live forever!”

Märy recoiled in fright from Dracula, who continued:

— “My life is eternal! Death shall never come for me! Oh — don’t believe that I, too, am mad! I remain here only because I love these living dead, I pity them from the depths of my soul, and I wish to return them all to life!”

Märy listened ever more fearfully to Dracula, this monstrous figure whose voice rumbled like the echoes of hell, whose deep-set, fire-black eyes seemed to spit flames. And he stood before the fragile little creature like one who, with a single movement, might crush his helpless victim in a fatal embrace. [...]

Chapter VII. The wedding feast

Meanwhile, the pale red glow of dawn crept into the palace...

Dracula, as if fleeing, turned away and said:

— “I loathe sunlight! It drives me away. Until we meet again — tonight.”

He vanished, and the gates of the palace slammed shut behind him.

Märy was left alone in the mysterious building, from every shadow of which Dracula's demonic visage seemed to grin at her... She tried to flee from this terrifying phantom, but it was in vain — Dracula followed her everywhere.

Agonizing hours passed... Mary struggled helplessly in her prison, from which escape was a hopeless dream. Her trembling body wandered from chamber to chamber, searching for a way out — but in vain. The dreadful vision of Dracula, the malice in his gaze, only deepened her fear and despair.

Night was drawing near... Mary hurried down into the palace garden... At that moment, the great gate opened with solemn slowness — and Dracula stepped inside.

— "How sweet of you to come and greet me," — he said to the startled girl.

Dracula took Mary by the arm and led her back into the palace.

— "Go and prepare yourself for our engagement celebration!".

At his signal, a group of slave women gathered around Mary and escorted her to a radiant, fragrant, flower-filled room. A bridal gown awaited her there, adorned with gold, silver, and precious gems. The women dressed her in the treasure-laden garments, and when she glittered in full splendor as Dracula's newest bride, they led her down to the palace's grand hall, where the son of the devil waited for her, flushed with excitement.

Dracula rushed to her with delight, a wicked smile playing on his lips. Mary, half-dreaming, half-fainting, surrendered herself to the power of this infernal man.

— "Welcome, my ravishing bride," — Dracula purred. — "Tonight we celebrate—our feast of joy, the prelude to our wedding!"

Loud music blared... a devilish wedding march roared through the hall, a strange, thunderous melody, to which a ballet of dancers, clad in fantastical costumes, performed a sensuous, seductive dance...

The entire palace swam in mystical light... blinding colors flared, one after another—dazzling hues bursting forth and vanishing, only to be replaced again.

It was terrifyingly magnificent — this dazzling celebration, Dracula's engagement feast, where he sought to make his latest bride his eternal captive.

— "After the shower of flowers, my kiss shall bind us for eternity!" said the groom to his bride.

At those words, like a downpour from a summer sky, thousands of flowers rained from the palace ceiling, filling every corner with petals...

A heady scent filled the vast chamber.

Dracula, intoxicated bent toward Mary to press his kiss upon her lips... His mouth quivered with desire, his arms poised to embrace.

But at that moment, Mary — sensing the danger — pushed him away, reached for the cross that hung from her necklace, and thrust it toward him, her eyes blazing with courage.

— “The cross! ... The cross! ...” — Dracula howled, recoiling in terror from the girl.

Panic seized the entire hall at the sight of this sudden scene... With Dracula, the evil spirits too fled in fear...

The way stood open before Mary...

And the girl, seizing her chance, ran-ran through the forgotten gate and out into the snowy night.

Translation by J. Soltész